

Prevention is the cure

Early intervention is the key to combatting our youth crisis

2024/25 Insight Report



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Executive Summary

Australia is facing a youth crisis that needs immediate attention, with New South Wales no exception to alarming trends. More and more young people come into contact with the criminal justice system, experience mental health issues, face housing insecurity and drop out of education and employment. Recent statistics highlight this troubling reality:

- 19,080 young people (aged 10 to 17) in New South Wales had a proceeding brought against them by police in 2023, with this figure steadily increasing over the past five years;¹
- Rates of young people (aged 10 to 17) in custody on remand - meaning they have not yet been tried or convicted for an offence - increased by 15% between 2019 and 2024 in New South Wales.² This is a troubling trend as even short periods of incarceration can have a long-lasting negative impact;³
- Nationally, mental health issues among young people (aged 16 to 24) surged by 50% between 2007 and 2021; in New South Wales nearly three in 10 young people indicate they are suffering high psychological distress;⁴
- The number of young people (aged 12 to 18) experiencing homelessness in New South Wales has reached 2,777 and is growing;⁵ and
- 22.5% of young people (aged 15 to 24) in New South Wales were partially or fully disengaged from education and employment in 2021.⁶

There is a viral element to these risk factors which typically sees an increase in the poor physical and mental health of the impacted young people, lower educational attainment, and a considerably higher potential for future incarceration.⁷

The financial consequences of these accumulating risk factors are staggering:

- Youth detention-based services cost New South Wales over \$200 million in 2023, a cost that is growing each year;⁸
- Keeping a child in custody in New South Wales costs \$2,759 per day, or \$1.1 million per year, a figure that has more than doubled over the past 10 years;⁹
- New South Wales spent \$2.2 billion on mental health services in 2021-22, a 55% increase over the past decade;¹⁰ and
- Supporting a homeless young person costs \$20,300 a year, with a total annual cost of youth homelessness of over \$200 million in New South Wales.¹¹

These statistics make a compelling case for investing in early intervention and prevention programs that target high-risk, vulnerable young people, improve their lifelong outcomes and reduce costs to our welfare, health and justice systems.

In a recent report, the Australian Human Rights Commission called for youth justice and wellbeing to become a national priority. The focus should be on providing support to vulnerable young people and their families much earlier than is currently the case and in a more coordinated and continuous way.¹²

Data suggests that young people who are incarcerated are:

6x



more likely to meet the criteria for a psychological disorder than the general population

5x



more likely to have experienced childhood abuse/neglect

12x



more likely to have been suspended from school

6x



more likely to not finish Year 10 at school¹²

Young people who come in contact with the justice system are often dealing with various forms of social, psychological, educational and economic disadvantage.

Early intervention programs are crucial, on-the-ground ways to address the drivers of incarceration and reduce future costs to key services. The aim of early intervention services is to avoid contact with the justice system in the first place, as well as to provide genuine pathways out of the system that can help young people to thrive.¹⁴

Support services provide value by addressing the drivers of incarceration, including disruptive social behaviour,¹⁵ education disengagement, unstable/unsafe home environments and homelessness.¹⁶ **Rather than targeting those risk factors individually, the most effective prevention programs take a multi-dimensional approach that support high-risk, vulnerable young people across various critical areas.**¹⁷

The key benefits of early intervention and prevention programs include:

- **Crisis prevention:** By its very nature, early intervention and prevention programs are more likely to address issues before they escalate.

- **Long-term impact:** By breaking the cycle of lifelong vulnerability, incarceration and its viral consequences and/or reliance on long-term welfare.
- **Addressing challenges holistically:** By tackling the complexity of challenges, including family violence/conflicts, unemployment, financial stress and mental health issues.
- **Cost savings:** Preventive interventions are often more cost effective in the long run compared to treating escalating challenges at later stages.

Noting the above and drawing on three separate case studies from best-practice intervention and prevention programs around the world - Le Chéile in Ireland, the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Streetwork in Australia – this report offers compelling evidence to suggest that models of early intervention and prevention are the optimum solution for improving the lives of high-risk, vulnerable young people. Evaluations of these programs also highlight the significant broader social and economic benefits associated with investment in proactive interventions compared to programs that only offer support once negative, self-perpetuating circumstances and behaviours have become much more difficult to reverse.

Introduction

Early intervention programs offer a critical opportunity to alter the trajectory of the lives of high-risk, vulnerable young people and to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes for them and for the community. In New South Wales alone, young people face unprecedented mental health and wellbeing challenges. When this is coupled with the effects of social disadvantage, their risk of involvement in criminal behaviour is significantly heightened.

Intervening with young people who have been identified as high risk and vulnerable means they can be provided with the personalised support and connection to specialised services that best fit their individual needs. Programs which offer mentoring and in-place support have significant potential to transform young people's lives. They open new opportunities for individuals and by doing so, also carry with them broader social and economic benefits.

This report firstly quantifies the scale of the wellbeing crisis currently affecting young people in New South Wales, with a focus on the youth justice system. It reviews established risk factors associated with youth incarceration, specifically examining mental health, family environment and educational disengagement. These problems have been worsened by the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health

and the current cost-of-living crisis, which is further burdening socially disadvantaged families across the state. By analysing the prevalence of these risk factors among young people, the report establishes the magnitude of a crisis – both social and economic – that demands attention.

The report then establishes the benefits offered by place-based early intervention initiatives. Recent reviews into the justice system have found that incarceration not only fails to prevent re-offending but also causes harm to young people. We need solutions which prevent people from coming into contact with the criminal justice system and which can effectively target our most high-risk, vulnerable young people. Place-based approaches to early intervention are effective when they involve tailored, holistic and collaborative approaches which are capable of responding to the complex and inter-connected challenges faced by vulnerable young people.

This report concludes with three case studies of early intervention programs across Ireland, the United States and Australia. These case studies showcase programs which employ evidence-based practices and models of intervention, and which have robust evaluative frameworks to quantify the benefits they offer individuals and society.



The youth wellbeing crisis in New South Wales

The teens and early 20s are a critically important developmental stage. Recent data, however, paints an alarming picture of the wellbeing of young people in New South Wales. Young people are increasingly experiencing poor mental health, disengagement from education, substance abuse and challenging home environments. These trends represent a crisis given that they are all indicators associated with longer term poverty, incarceration, poor health and early mortality.¹⁸

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUTH INCARCERATION

The relationship between incarceration and disadvantage is particularly stark. The most recent Young People in Custody Health Survey¹⁹ undertaken by the New South Wales government clearly highlights the mental health, family environment and educational determinants of youth incarceration.

THE SCALE OF HIGH-RISK, VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

The risk factors for incarceration below provide insights into which groups of young people are at increased risk of coming into contact with the justice system and experiencing a lower quality of life. Data suggests that the number of high-risk, vulnerable young people in New South Wales is at crisis point.

Mental health

Australia's young people are experiencing a disturbing decline in their mental health. Researchers have declared the mental health of young Australians a public health crisis, with severe human and economic consequences.²⁰ The National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing (Australian Bureau of Statistics) found that for the 16- to 24-year-old age group, **mental disorder rose by 50% between 2007 and 2021, with 39% of this age cohort suffering from mental disorders** in 2021.²¹

Research shows that of the young people in custody in New South Wales:²¹

83%



met criteria for a psychological disorder in the preceding 12 months

(vs 14% for the general New South Wales population), the most common being:

- attention/behavioural disorders (59%);
- substance use disorders (58%);
- alcohol use disorders (34%);
- anxiety disorders (24%);
- mood disorders (11%).

48%



had been exposed to a past traumatic event

7.5%



had made a suicide attempt requiring medical intervention

(vs 0.6% for the general New South Wales population)

Mission Australia's Youth Survey Report (2023), which surveyed 19,400 young Australians aged 15-19, reveals high rates of broad mental health concerns. **Nearly three in 10 (27%) young people in New South Wales indicated high psychological distress** and 13% reported mental health issues as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals. Almost one-quarter (21%) felt lonely all or most of the time, and over a third (35%) were personally extremely or very concerned about mental health.²³

For Australians aged 15-24, mental health conditions and substance-use disorders are the leading cause of disease burden.²⁴ Over one in 10 (13%) of Australians aged 16-24 are estimated to have a substance-abuse disorder.²⁵ Extensive global research shows that people living with a mental illness have a reduced life expectancy.²⁶ Economic modelling by Mental Health Australia and KPMG estimated **\$90 million in available short-term savings from increased investment into prevention and early intervention mental health programs.**²⁷

However, the availability of specialist mental health services for young people is not enough. Research studies confirm that **vulnerable young people require support to access mental health treatment.** This is due to factors including stigma, lack of awareness, barriers to access (including cultural and linguistic barriers), complex needs and a lack of support networks.²⁸ Providing tailored support to address these service system barriers is essential in ensuring that young people can access the mental health care they need.

Disengagement from education

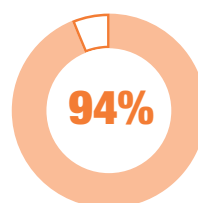
In the 2021 Census, **22.5% of 15- to 24-year-olds in New South Wales were partially or completely disengaged from employment and education.**²⁹

2023 polling commissioned by Senator Penny Allman-Payne indicates extremely high levels of school refusal nationally,³⁰ which is a key indicator of disengagement from education. **39% of parents polled agreed or strongly agreed that their child had experienced school refusal in the past year.**

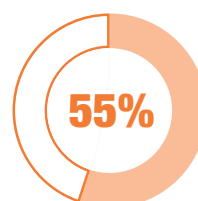
Pilot research in New South Wales shows the largest dip in school engagement occurs in Year 9, when students are aged 14-15³¹ – there is a clear need to target this age group with re-engagement interventions.

In Mission Australia's 2023 youth survey, over one-third (37%) of young people across Australia reported barriers to achieving their study and work goals. These barriers included mental health (42%), financial difficulties (29%), family responsibilities (13%) and lack of family support (9%).

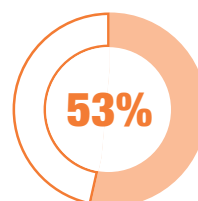
Of the young people in custody:³¹



had previously been suspended from school
(vs 8% for the general New South Wales population)



had previously been expelled from school
(vs under 1% for the general New South Wales population)



had a highest level of educational attainment of Year 9 or below
(vs 9% for the general New South Wales population)

Of the young people incarcerated in New South Wales:³²



68%

had experienced childhood abuse/neglect

(vs 14% for the general New South Wales population)



58%



22%

26% of young people had moved two or more times in the six months prior to custody with young women more likely than young men to have done so



Aboriginal participants

Non-Aboriginal participants

54%



have had a parent in prison

Aboriginal participants were more likely than non-Aboriginal participants to have a parent that had been in prison

21%



of young people had been placed in care before the age of 16 years

(vs 0.9% for the general New South Wales population)

Family environment

Many young people are not able to turn to family when they need help. Findings from Mission Australia's 2023 survey show that 8% of young people rated their family's ability to get along as poor. When asked about issues that were of personal concern, one in six (16%) reported family conflict and 7% reported domestic or family violence. Data on the prevalence of domestic violence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that 13% of people aged 18 years and over had witnessed domestic violence before the age of 15; a further 9% reported having experienced physical abuse and 8% experienced sexual abuse.³⁴

The number of young people who are homeless in New South Wales is also growing. **At the 2021 Census, 2,777 young people (aged 10-18) were without a secure home.** For children under 12, this represented a 7% increase from the 2016 Census.³⁵ The most common reasons young people sought homelessness assistance in 2020-21 were housing crisis, family and domestic violence, and relationship or family breakdown.³⁶ It is also widely recognised among homelessness support providers and associated services that couch-surfing and house-hopping are prevalent among young people, but that this new form of homelessness is very difficult to map statistically.

THE ECONOMIC COSTS OF HIGH-RISK, VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

In addition to the personal and social toll of poor life outcomes associated with high-risk, vulnerable young people in New South Wales, this crisis also has significant direct economic costs. The expected long-term economic burden of the relatively small but growing group of high-risk, vulnerable young people will be enormous. It has been estimated that **7% of the New South Wales population under 25 will be responsible for 50% of the estimated future costs for key New South Wales services such as welfare, housing and justice.** Just 1% of those under 25 will account for 32% of estimated future justice costs – costs that keep growing each year.³⁷

Government expenditure on youth detention-based services alone reached \$201 million in 2023. **A single child in custody costs \$2,759 per day³⁸** and this cost has **more than doubled over the last 10 years.**³⁹

On an average night, 200 young people aged between 10 and 18 years were being held in detention in New South Wales in 2023. Of those, almost three-quarters (73%) were being held on remand, meaning they had not yet been tried or convicted of a crime. Of those held on remand, 8% were held pending proceedings for minor offences (e.g. public order, justice proceedings, property damage) and 23% were held pending proceedings for theft.⁴⁰ Over half (60%) of young people held on remand were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Numbers of young people on remand in NSW have increased by 15% between 2019 and 2024. This growth is problematic as even short periods of incarceration can have wide-ranging adverse impacts, including repeat contact with the justice system.⁴¹

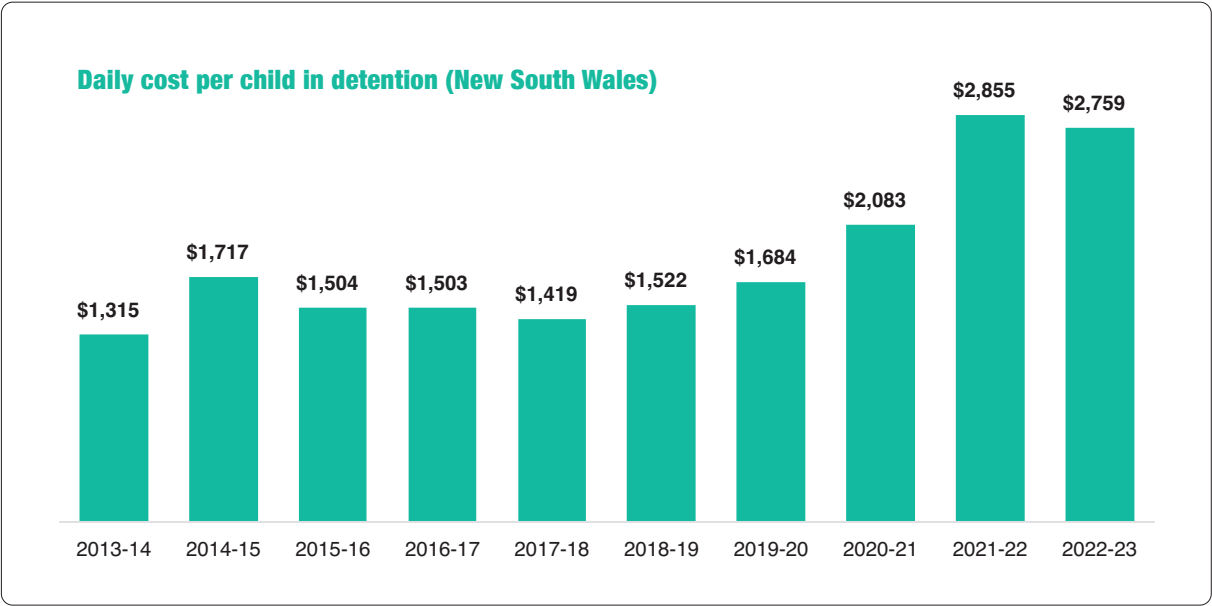
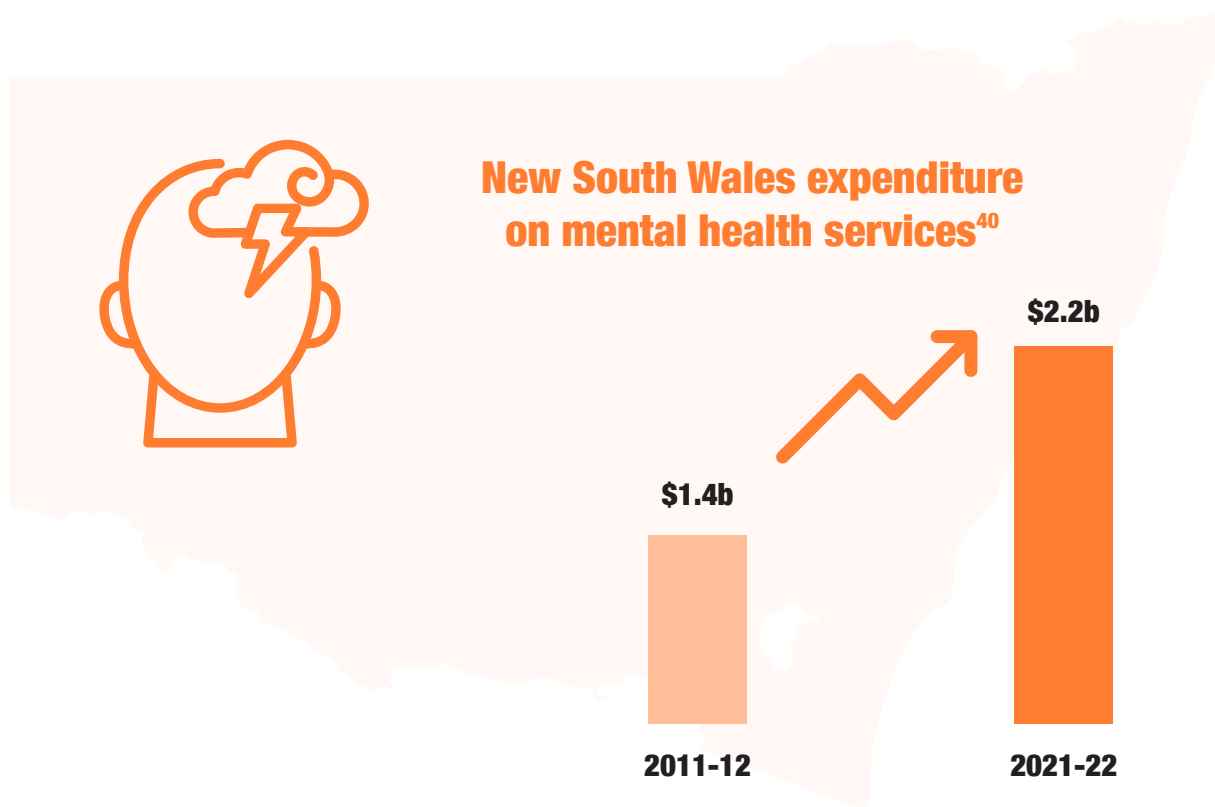


Chart 1: Productivity Commission (2024). Report on government services 2024: Youth justice services, table 17A.21; Productivity Commission (2016). Report on government services 2016: Youth justice services, table 16A.24.



Without post-release support, young people exiting detention can become caught in a cycle of incarceration, going on to become adults who continue to have contact with the justice and prison systems. In 2023, the total net operating expenditure for adult prisons was over \$2 billion,⁴² an increase of 35% over the past 10 years.⁴³ One imprisoned adult in New South Wales costs taxpayers \$298 per day and \$108,890 per year.⁴⁴ The New South Wales adult prison population in 2023 was the highest in Australia with 12,316 incarcerated persons,⁴⁵ of which 57% have been in prison before.⁴⁶ Half of the prison population (49%) return to prison within two years of their release,⁴⁷ indicating that the prison system is not effective in rehabilitating people.

New South Wales's prison system is expensive as well as ineffective. Statistics show that once people have been to prison, they are likely to become entrenched in a cycle of incarceration, meaning that they revolve in and out of prison across their life span.

Vulnerable young people between the ages of 10 and 14^a are almost four times as likely to enter custody as non-vulnerable young people. For the 16 to 18 age group, vulnerable young people are eight times as likely to enter custody as non-vulnerable.⁴⁸ Early support programs that target support of high-risk, vulnerable young people can disrupt the prison pipeline. They can set young people on a better path and avoid a revolving door of re-offending that costs taxpayers millions.

Beyond the prison system, other outcomes associated with high-risk, vulnerable young people also have significant economic costs. **Supporting a homeless young person in New South Wales, for example, is estimated to cost \$20,300 a year, with the total annual cost of youth homelessness exceeding \$200 million.**⁴⁹ The mental health crisis also comes at a huge cost. In 2021-22, New South Wales spent \$2.2 billion on mental health services.⁵⁰ This cost has almost doubled over the last decade, with mental health services in 2011-12 costing the state \$1.4 billion.⁵¹

a In the Forecasting Future Outcomes report, young people between the ages of 10 and 14 were classified as vulnerable if they had exhibited any of the following risk factors in the past five years: 1. One or more parental risk factors (domestic violence; mental health; alcohol and other drugs; or contact with the justice system); 2. Interaction with the justice system; 3. Assessed as being at risk of significant harm.

The case for place-based early intervention

KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE OUT OF PRISON REQUIRES INVESTMENT IN EARLY INTERVENTION PROVIDERS

Youth justice systems in Australia, including in New South Wales, have been extensively reviewed in recent years. Reviews from oversight bodies, Commonwealth agencies and non-government organisations agree that incarceration harms young people and does little to reduce re-offending.⁵²

Commitment to justice reinvestment approaches in New South Wales have seen the re-offending rates of young people in the state declining. The percentage of young people re-offending within 12 months of contact with Youth Justice New South Wales fell from 48.9% in 2017-18 to 43.8% in 2021-2022.⁵³ However, the rate of decline has flattened, with a decrease of only 0.5% between 2020-21 and 2021-22.⁵⁴

The number of young people aged 10-17 proceeded against by New South Wales police also rose between 2022 and 2023 from 17,914 to 19,080.⁵⁵

Locking young people up does not address the reasons for their offending behaviour and does not provide them with opportunities to get back on track through education or rehabilitation.⁵⁶ Being in prison causes more harm to these young people who often have pre-existing mental and physical health issues. Young people in prison typically experience far poorer health and higher mortality rates. They have especially poor outcomes in terms of dental health, reproductive health and mental health (including substance abuse disorders).⁵⁷

These statistics reinforce recent advocacy calls for greater investment in crime prevention, early intervention and diversion programs as an alternative to incarceration - the central tenet of the justice reinvestment approach.

New South Wales must sustain and grow successful early intervention initiatives to reduce the overall number of young people in contact with the justice system and to ensure re-offending does not increase.

Commitment to justice reinvestment approaches in New South Wales have seen the re-offending rates of young people in the state declining.

TARGETING EARLY INTERVENTION FOR HIGH-RISK, VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE

Successful early intervention requires effectively targeting and prioritising attention on young people who have characteristics which place them at higher risk of future imprisonment and overall poor health and wellbeing outcomes. The factors we know are associated with youth incarceration have been previously highlighted and include access to education, stable housing, employment, economic security and experience of discrimination.⁵⁸

A study of 2,731 people in New South Wales revealed eight factors that strongly increased someone's chances of being imprisoned:⁵⁹

1 Experiencing homelessness or unstable housing

2 Having been in out of home (foster) care

3 Being disengaged from or not attending school

4 Being a First Nations person

5 Having contact with police as a young person

6 Not receiving support for mental health and cognitive disability, including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

7 Problematic alcohol and other drug use

8 Living in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage

The more of the above factors a person experiences, the more likely they are to be imprisoned.

Imprisonment is also a 'revolving door' – being previously imprisoned increases the likelihood of re-offending and being imprisoned again in the future. This makes young people who have had previous contact with the youth justice system a highly vulnerable group.⁶⁰

Understanding and engaging the high-risk, vulnerable young people across all communities is the critical first step in breaking the cycle of justice system involvement.

ADDRESSING THE RISK FACTORS FOR VIOLENCE PERPETRATION

Research into the perpetration of interpersonal violence shows that neuropsychiatric disorders and substance use disorders are among the strongest risk factors. The most important historical factor is witnessing or being a victim of violence in childhood.⁶¹ Young people who experience violence in childhood, suffer from poor mental health and substance issues and do not receive adequate services, support and treatment are statistically proven to be at greater risk of perpetrating violence later in life. Antisocial behaviours and stressors in adolescence and family disadvantage can also be a predictor of interpersonal violence perpetration into adulthood.⁶²

With one in six young people experiencing family conflict and 7% family violence,⁶³ as well as 39% suffering a mental health disorder⁶⁴ – including 13% with substance or alcohol abuse⁶⁵ – increasing numbers of young people are experiencing the risk factors for perpetrating violence in adulthood.

However, programs that help young people to build stronger social, emotional, and behavioural competencies can prevent violence or the escalation of antisocial behaviours.⁶⁶ Providing high-risk, vulnerable young people with early and effective support not only benefits the young person but also protects the wider community by reducing the likelihood of violent offences in the future.

THE VALUE OF PLACE-BASED EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Early intervention programs are crucial, on-the-ground ways to address the drivers of involvement with the justice system and reduce future costs to key services. They aim to avoid contact with the justice system in the first place as well as to provide genuine pathways out of it by helping young people to thrive.⁶⁷

Support services provide value by addressing disruptive social behaviour,⁶⁸ education disengagement, unstable/unsafe home environments and homelessness.⁶⁹

Rather than targeting those risk factors individually, the most effective prevention programs take a multi-dimensional approach that supports high risk, vulnerable young people across various critical areas.⁷⁰

The key benefits of early intervention programs include:

- **Crisis prevention:** By their very nature, early intervention and prevention programs are more likely to address issues before they escalate.
- **Long-term impact:** By breaking the cycle of lifelong vulnerability, incarceration and its viral consequences and/or reliance on long-term welfare.
- **Addressing challenges holistically:** By tackling the complexity of challenges, including family violence/conflicts, unemployment, financial stress and mental health issues.
- **Cost savings:** Preventive interventions are often more cost effective in the long run compared to treating escalating challenges at later stages.



An extensive review of primarily New South Wales-based early intervention and prevention program evaluations by the Justice Reform Initiative found that they can:⁷¹



Analyses of youth justice interventions show that programs that provide the following services are notably more effective in reducing re-offending rates than disciplinary programs, fear-based deterrence or intensive surveillance/supervision:

- **Skill building** (e.g., cognitive-behavioural techniques, social skills, academic and vocational skill building).
- **Counselling** (e.g., individual, group, family and mentoring).
- **Multiple coordinated services** (e.g., youth work, case management and service brokering).⁷²

Review studies also note how community-based mentoring programs have value as part of national strategies on early prevention.⁷³

Place-based community programs are particularly effective. They can respond to the unique circumstances of a specific community and geographical area. Crime prevention works best when it is contextual and is not a one-size-fits-all approach.⁷⁴

Key advantages of place-based services include:

- **Tailored responses:** Place-based approaches recognise that different places have unique challenges and opportunities. By focusing on specific geographic areas, interventions can be tailored to address the specific needs of the community.

- **Holistic approach:** Place-based programs allow for a more holistic understanding of the complex interactions between social, economic, environmental and cultural factors within a particular place. This understanding enables interventions to address multiple dimensions of wellbeing simultaneously.
- **Collaboration:** Place-based approaches encourage collaboration between various stakeholders including government agencies, allied service agencies, non-profit organisations, businesses and residents. By leveraging diverse expertise and resources, these collaborations can achieve greater impact than isolated efforts.
- **Long-term sustainability:** By investing in the development of communities over the long term, place-based approaches aim to create sustainable change that continues beyond the duration of specific projects or programs.

However, despite their proven effectiveness, there are currently not enough place-based, early intervention and crime prevention programs in New South Wales and Australia. Limited resourcing and funding of programs has been identified as the main reason for the lack of those support services.⁷⁵

Case studies of early intervention programs

The three case studies presented below represent international examples of place-based, early intervention programs designed to improve outcomes for high-risk, vulnerable young people. The case studies have been selected based on their clear articulation of a model of intervention, their longevity in offering services to the community, and the availability of evaluative research capable of quantifying their impacts.

CASE STUDY 1: **LE CHÉILE MENTORING, IRELAND**

Le Chéile Mentoring⁷⁶ is a national in-place mentoring service in Ireland that has been working with young people and their families since 2005 to provide support in situations where a young person is involved in or at risk of offending. The majority of participants join Le Chéile's program as a result of a referral from probation services. Each year around 200 young people in Ireland receive mentoring support through Le Chéile.

Intervention model

Le Chéile's core service is a one-to-one support model that matches a volunteer mentor with a young person (aged 12 to 24). This mentoring relationship typically lasts up to one year or more, with the mentor providing a positive role model to the young person. Mentoring involves regular sessions – typically about two hours per week – and is designed around structured activities to build self-esteem and self-confidence. Mentors provide support, stability and general guidance to help young people set achievable goals. Parents of children also have the opportunity to participate in parent mentoring.

Impact

Le Chéile Mentoring has been the focus of a comprehensive evaluation of its effectiveness and outcomes.⁷⁷ The evaluation quantified several benefits attributable to participation in the program and found that overall perception of the mentoring experience was high among mentees. The evaluation examined a range of improvements in mentee behaviour. These were measured at the beginning and conclusion of a participant's involvement in Le Chéile and were examined from the perspectives of both mentors and mentees. The research also sought to isolate the extent to which any improvements were attributable to mentoring as opposed to other factors.

When considering the foundational risk factors associated with youth crime and incarceration, the study found mentoring had improved outcomes across a range of measures.

In evaluating the effects of the mentoring program on offending and antisocial behaviour, assessments by mentors saw an average reduction of 28% using a 10-point behaviour scale. Almost half (49%) of this change was attributed to mentoring. Mentees themselves reported much higher levels of improvement (48% reduction), and also attributed more of this change to the mentoring program (63%).

The evaluation of Le Chéile also sought to quantify the social return on investment (SROI) of the mentoring program. The 'values' incorporated into this assessment included those stemming from improved family relations, improved peer relations, mentee involvement in activities outside the home, reduction in substance misuse, involvement in education/work/training, self-confidence, wellbeing, avoiding re-offending/detention, and health services. These were offset against costs associated with the delivery of Le Chéile's program and probationary services. The value of benefits was discounted over time, with reductions also made to reflect the degree to which respondents attributed improvements in their circumstances to the mentoring program.

The resulting cost-benefit analysis demonstrated an overall social benefit of €4.35 for every €1 spent on the delivery of Le Chéile. This can be separated out into an SROI of €2.66 for the Young Person mentoring program and €9.42 for the optionally accompanying Parent mentoring program.

Measure of improvement	Average overall improvement	
	Rated by mentors	Rated by mentees
The relationship of young person mentees with:		
■ Parents	11%	26%
■ Other family members	8%	20%
■ Peers	9%	24%
■ Authority figures	23%	51%
Engagement in education, work or training	25%	38%
Level of self-confidence	24%	45%
Wellbeing:		
■ Hopefulness	25%	61%
■ Happiness	23%	49%
Reduction in substance misuse:		
■ Alcohol misuse	12%	33%
■ Drug misuse	16%	37%
Reduction in offending and antisocial behaviour	28%	48%

Table 1: Summary of data provided in the Le Chéile evaluation report. Source: Dwyer, K. (2017) Reducing youth crime in Ireland: An evaluation of Le Chéile Mentoring.

LIAM'S STORY

Liam was 19 when he was referred by the Probation Service to Le Chéile Mentoring. His probation officer was concerned as his offending behaviour was connected to addiction and mental health struggles. He had spent some time living on the streets and had a history of going missing, which caused great concern to his mother.

Liam made fantastic progress over the year he was matched with his mentor. He came from a place of being at risk and vulnerable to returning to education, having his addiction and mental health issues under control, enjoying a healthy relationship with his mother and having a more positive and hopeful outlook for his future. He spoke to his mentor every week without fail. His mentor supported his return to education with advice and resources. Liam coped remarkably well during lockdown and his dedication to connecting with his mentor says a lot about the strength of their relationship and the value he placed on it.

CASE STUDY 2:

BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF AMERICA COMMUNITY-BASED MENTORING, UNITED STATES

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) has been operating in the United States since 1904, providing community and school-based programs which aim to have a positive impact on young people's self-confidence and education as well as juvenile justice. They operate through a network of more than 230 agencies nationwide. In 2020, just under 110,000 young people were served by the BBBSA's community-based mentoring (CBM) programs.

Intervention model

Young people are enrolled in CBM through referrals by parents/guardians, schools and social service agencies. Age at enrolment is typically between six and 14, with mentor/mentee matches able to last until they turn 18 or graduate high school.

The theoretical model of youth mentoring that underpins BBBSA's CBM is premised on establishing a strong connection between mentor ('Bigs') and mentee ('Littles') who are matched based on considerations such as shared interests. The strength of this relationship is then central to supporting positive outcomes by fostering socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development. The ultimate aims are to minimise risky and antisocial behaviours, such as substance abuse, while improving academic achievement and measures of wellbeing.

Mentors assume a role in which they act as positive and supportive role models who provide their mentees with opportunities to develop new skills and ways of thinking. Mentors spend regular time with their mentee (typically a few times a month and a few hours each time) in their community by engaging in recreational and social activities. This one-on-one mentoring is accompanied by regular check-ins with BBBSA staff, who provide professional guidance for both mentors and mentees. The duration of mentoring matches made as part of CBM typically last for at least one year.

Impact

BBBSA's CBM is currently the subject of a large randomised controlled trial, conducted by the University of Illinois Chicago, which is examining the effects of the program on crime and delinquency.⁷⁸ The randomised controlled nature of the research – in which a treatment group immediately eligible for mentoring were contrasted with a control group who will be eligible for mentoring after the four-year study – represents a rare opportunity to analyse the impacts of mentoring through a rigorous longitudinal study.

Intention-to-treat based analysis of the treatment and control groups found positive effects of CBM for two of four hypothesised outcomes. When measured after 18 months, young people in the treatment group who were enrolled in mentoring were less than half as likely to have been arrested (4.9% vs 10.7% for the control group) and were also less likely to have any reports of substance abuse (10.1% vs 17.2%). There were not, however, any significant differences between the groups for either property or violence-related delinquent behaviour.

In addition to reduced acts of crime, the study also examined differences in both risk and protective factors associated with criminal behaviour. It found significant improvement among the treatment group for measures of resilience, wellbeing and pro-social behaviours such as self-control, self-advocacy, hopeful future expectations and academic engagement.

The interim findings from this research provide provisional support for the capacity of the CBM program model to reduce rates of arrest and substance abuse. Unlike other mentoring and early intervention programs, the threshold for referral to BBBSA CBM is lower and it is not focused on the acute end of the spectrum of young people who have already had some involvement in crime or delinquency. The program's impacts therefore point to the broader value of mentoring interventions for young people who face forms of vulnerability.

MARCUS'S STORY

When Little Brother Marcus was just three years old, his aunt took full custody of him because neither of his parents was in a place to raise him. One of his parents was struggling with opioid addiction and the other was not a consistent presence. They signed him up to be a Little Brother through BBBS of Cumberland & Salem Counties and he was matched with Big Brother Kevin.

Marcus's life slowly started to change. At first, Big Brother Kevin visited Marcus at school, playing kickball or working on school work. When Marcus transitioned to middle school, they became a community-based match so they could see each other outside of school and on weekends.

Marcus's aunt saw a change in him. Kevin's family was exactly what Marcus had been missing his whole life, she says. *"As time passed, Marcus no longer belonged to a mentoring program," she says. "He belonged to a family that loved and accepted him."*

"If I never had Kevin, I don't know what my life would be like," Marcus says. "Kevin helped me choose goals for my future, like playing football for the University of Florida. I want to be a Gator."

CASE STUDY 3: STREETWORK KICKSTART MENTORING PROGRAM, NEW SOUTH WALES

Streetwork Australia was founded in Sydney in 1980 with the aim of helping vulnerable young people turn their lives around. Streetwork's outreach and early intervention programs are specifically curated to support young people who may be experiencing challenges at home, who might have been referred through the justice system or directly by the police, and/or who are known to have disengaged from school. In some cases, domestic violence or abuse may have caused them to leave home and left them at risk of homelessness and exploitation. Problems with drugs or alcohol are common and poor mental health is almost always a by-product of these circumstances. Streetwork's intake is as diverse as it is complex, with just over a third of its 2023 intake being female and 14% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Streetwork's model of service places young people at the centre with individually tailored capacity-building activities including intensive mentorship, goal setting and participation in pro-social behaviours.

Since its inception nearly half a century ago, Streetwork has helped to turn around the lives of nearly 5,000 high-risk, vulnerable young people, supporting 360 (equating to nearly one young life a day) in 2023.

Key audited impact outcomes of Streetwork's unique support program include:

- Reducing contact with the justice system
- Re-engaging with education and training
- Increased wellbeing and access to mental health supports

Intervention model

TRUST. EMPOWERMENT. SUPPORT. CONNECTION.

Streetwork's mentoring model integrates case management with a youth work approach. The establishment of trusting relationships with young

people is central to the model, which recognises trust as fundamental to engagement and fostering interest. The approach emphasises **empowering** the young person and building a partnership between the youth caseworker and the young person. The strategy is informed by evidence-based practices.

The needs and risk factors of each young person are addressed through a holistic model of care. The young person is **supported** by their youth caseworkers to build their core strengths and capabilities and address the specific challenges they face (such as completing school). To address these challenges, young people are often **connected** with external service providers (such as mental health workers or drug and alcohol counselling).

Streetwork's youth caseworkers invest time in getting to know each young person, showing genuine interest and concern for their wellbeing. This rapport building is crucial because many high-risk, vulnerable young people have experienced inconsistent or unreliable support from adults in their lives, which can often result in a mistrust of people in positions of authority. By consistently showing up, listening and respecting the young person's autonomy, caseworkers break down these barriers, operating at the '**pace of trust**'.

Physically supporting young people to access services and attend appointments is equally important. Many high-risk, vulnerable young people face logistical and psychological barriers that prevent them from seeking the help they need. These can include lack of transportation, fear of stigmatisation, or simply feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of navigating the system.

Streetwork caseworkers often accompany young people to appointments, providing not just practical support but also emotional reassurance. This hands-on assistance can make the difference between a young person receiving the help they need or falling through the cracks. By ensuring they can access necessary services, **Streetwork helps to build a network of support** around these individuals, enabling them to make positive changes and work towards their goals.

Streetwork also plays an important role as a **‘community connector’** among service providers, supporting education, employment, health and juvenile justice services in their local communities to work together towards their common goal of improving the lives of young people.

Impact

The social impact of Streetwork’s programs has been independently evaluated every year for the past seven years by Huber Social, complemented by an economic impact study of the program conducted by PwC in 2020.⁷⁹ These evaluations demonstrate that Streetwork has consistently enhanced the wellbeing of program participants and supported them to achieve their goals.

The most recent Social Impact Report found that young people who participated in Streetwork’s primary program experienced, on average, a 35% increase in measures of wellbeing. In particular, the findings

showed a positive shift in indicators of mental wellness and resilience. The research also showed significant success in building the life skills of participants, with 84% experiencing an increase in their ability to find and secure employment.

Economic analysis found that **every \$1 invested in Streetwork saw a return to the community of \$16.**⁸⁰ It found the total long-term benefit to the community of Streetwork’s activities in 2019 to be worth almost \$90 million, resulting from reductions in the prevalence of youth crime, homelessness, mental health issues, early school leavers, suicide and self-harm. These figures are in line with other economic modelling of the benefits of early intervention programs focused on young people in Australia. Modelling by KPMG focusing on the value of early intervention to address mental health, for example, estimated a long-term return on investment of \$10.50 for every \$1 spent.⁸¹

JULIETTE’S STORY

At 14, Juliette referred herself to Streetwork after hearing about the organisation through an outreach activity at her high school. She had been in trouble with the police and was required to attend court proceedings. She had dropped out of school and because she was finding it difficult to manage her temper, she was losing friends and the ability to communicate with her parents.

During weekly meetings with her Streetwork Youth Caseworker, Juliette began to realise that the decisions she had been making were placing her safety at risk and cutting her off from her support networks. She was supported to set goals and to make life changes and together with her caseworker she soon fulfilled her court obligations.

Juliette was then connected with a specialist organisation who taught her anger management techniques. Feeling more confident and settled, she soon returned to school and resumed her studies. Juliette even started to reach out to her family and began healing her relationships with friends.

“I was angry all the time. Everything, even small things like sitting in a classroom, made me feel stifled and unhappy. The court stuff was really difficult. Even though I knew that I had to do it, I just ignored the deadlines: pretended they weren’t there. I didn’t know how to fill in the forms by myself and I didn’t want to ask anyone for help. My Streetwork Youth Caseworker has made a world of difference to me and I feel much calmer now”.

Conclusion

New South Wales is currently experiencing a youth wellbeing crisis. The number of young people involved with the justice system is surging, youth mental health disorders are at a record high, and data is also pointing to alarming rates of disengagement from education and challenging family environments. All of these factors are associated with poor long-term life outcomes relating to health, poverty and crime.

Further to this, evidence suggests that incarceration does little to reduce re-offending and also causes harm to young people. At the same time, the current model of managing youth crime comes with massive direct and indirect costs to the community. New South Wales government expenditure on youth detention alone reached \$201 million in 2023.

New South Wales is in urgent need of a new approach to supporting high-risk, vulnerable young people.

Early intervention programs are a proven mechanism to address this crisis head-on, improving the long-term quality of young people's lives while also delivering benefits to the community.

These programs work by targeting high-risk, vulnerable young people with support before situations escalate. They can be tailored to individual circumstances to address the complex interplay of challenges which are impacting on each child. This can include the involvement of individual mentoring or caseworkers who can provide practical, emotional and cognitive support that delivers long-term outcomes.

Evaluations of early intervention programs around the world demonstrate the benefits that they can provide to the young people they assist and to the broader community. **Multi-dimensional support is critical to address inter-connected risk factors.**

Early intervention programs have the power to transform the lives of high-risk, vulnerable young people, offering a lifeline of personal, social and economic benefits.

We urgently need to invest in these initiatives to remove the obstacles that prevent far too many young people from reaching their full potential.

Investing in these programs not only breaks cycles of disadvantage but also reduces economic burdens and fosters a generation of empowered individuals who contribute to a stronger and healthier society.

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